

DAVID a gent with style NIVEN

THE other evening I had a rather sad preview of one of the two remaining films made by David Niven, as yet, unseen by the public.

Niven's death, in his early seventies, from a harrowing wasting disease, medically termed amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, robbed the world of its best-known and much-loved British gentleman. For in all his performances, or rather most, he represented the very embodiment of the suave, sophisticated gent, full of charm, wit and style.

Niven was unique, but, luckily for us, his films, and his memory, will live on.

Before his death at the end of July, Niven had made two new films which will soon be given a release. In the summer of '81 he made a picture called *Menage A Trois* for director Bryan Forbes. It's been re-titled *Better Late Than Never* and it will go straight on to video release through Guild Home Video.

After that Niven worked on *The Curse Of The Pink Panther* which was a return to the part of Sir Charles Litton, known as 'The Phantom', the role he first created for the original Pink Panther movie, twenty years before. The film will be released next February.

Between the productions of these two movies came the discovery that something was very wrong with Niven. In fact, when he guested on Michael Parkinson's TV chat show on October 3, 1981, Niven's speech was distinctly slurred. He kept clearing his throat and apologising to Parky for the 'frog in my throat'. Niven sounded like he had been enjoying one drink too many before the programme. Many people rang the BBC after transmission to inquire about Niven's appearance. There seemed to be much public concern.

What we didn't realise then was that Niven's voice was going, and now having seen him in *Better Late Than Never* (which remember was filmed only a few months before his Parky appearance) it is obvious that the disease which finally killed him had begun to take an effect. David's deliveries are marked by obvious problems with pronunciations of certain words, like the word 'danger' which comes out as 'ganger'.

"We noticed it on the set," said a friend who worked on the picture. "He was having problems with lengthy passages of dialogue. Eventually these were reduced to shorter bursts."

The deterioration of Niven's speech must have been quite fast, as it was recently revealed that Niven's lines in *The Curse Of The Pink Panther* have been dubbed by the American impressionist Rich Little.

In this tribute to the popular actor, Ken Ferguson reports on one of his last films *Better Late Than Never*, now released on video

Better Late Than Never therefore becomes the very last film in which the familiar Niven voice is heard. Of course, now being aware of the problem he was just beginning to suffer from, viewing it tends to dull the witty comedy about two men, Niven and Art Carney, who try to capture the heart of a young, and very wealthy nine-year-old girl, who has inherited a family fortune after the death of her own parents, and her Countess grandmother.

Either Niven or Carney is, in fact, her real grandfather because both had an affair at more or less the same time during the war with her grandmother. Of course Bridget turns out to be something of a precocious, but delightful, handful. Maggie Smith as Anderson is her cynical, amusing nanny, and the lovely Catherine Hicks who starred as Marilyn Monroe in *Marilyn The Untold Story*, appears as the voluptuous Sable ("My mum had something going with the furrier," she explains). And it's Sable who, having met Niven on the beach, delivers a line which really sums up the kind of man he really was. When in the movie she's asked *why* she likes him, she replies; "He didn't step

on the sandcastles. He walked around them."

Better Late Than Never has finally arrived after a two-year wait. For a time it seemed as if we'd lost the film for good, the fact that it has now shown up after Niven's death is quite sad because it is a nice little gem of a comedy, produced by Niven's son, David Jr. and Jack Haley Jr. But, alas, it now takes on a more poignant and tragic identification. And there's a decided lump in the throat in the film's happy ending sequence when Niven looks down at little Kimberley Partridge, who plays Bridget, and offers her a piece of worldly Niven advice — "Don't grow up too quickly," he tells her.

Ironically, and considering these early problems he was having with his speech, Niven sings for the first time on screen. Again the Noel Coward song he performs (to boos and slow handclaps by the way), "I Went To A Marvellous Party", also seems to take on more significance now than when he actually sang it on the set.

For David Niven life, indeed, had been a marvellous party and his enjoyment of it always clearly showed.

A scene from *Better Late Than Never* the movie produced by David's son, David Jr. It was made in 1981 just before David lost the use of his voice and we can now see it on video. From left to right: David, Catherine Hicks (back view), Maggie Smith, Kimberley Partridge and Art Carney





With Noelle Middleton in *Carrington VC*. (1955), one of the more famous of his many British uniformed roles. He was a descendant of two generations of professional soldiers, and in World War II was among the first Hollywood stars (he entered films as an extra in 1934) to join the British army as a lieutenant. He was discharged as a colonel.

How we'll always remember Niven as a witty, suave, impeccably dressed gentleman who could handle any situation with charm and style. Born James David Graham Niven on 1st March 1909 in Kirriemuir, Scotland, he died on 30th July 1983

With Deborah Kerr his co-star of *Separate Tables*, the film he made in the late Fifties and for which he won his only Oscar and the New York Critics best actor award for his dramatic performance as a fake army major



David's first wife died tragically after a fall during a Hollywood party. Their two sons David Jr. and Jamie were mainly brought up by David's second wife, Swedish-born Hjordis, whom he married in 1948. This picture of the family was taken on location filming of *The Guns Of Navarone* in 1960

The Nivens adopted two daughters in the early Sixties. The family, who had homes in Switzerland and on the French Riviera, are pictured at Heathrow Airport in 1967, on just one of their many flights around the world for David's successful movie career. Kristina was then 5½ and Fiona, 3½.

